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Political video mashups as allegories of citizen empowerment

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Abstract

When the viral video "Vote Different" broke into the mainstream media in March 2007, the political video mashup became a notable media phenomenon. User–generated mashups threatened to cut through the U.S. news clutter that typically shapes election discourse. In this paper, political video mashups are examined as allegories of citizen empowerment during the 2008 U.S. presidential election. Political video mashups can act as tools of political advocacy, forms of political protest, and modes of political commentary. Finally, though they are already being co–opted by mainstream political campaigns, the paper addresses the potential of mashups to re–interpret political messages in ways that may encourage the active re–framing of political issues among twenty–first century citizens.

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Introduction

"We are making change and change doesn't happen in front of your living room TV."
Robin Bell, a remix video artist [1].

Video mashups are part of a growing online remix culture, and typically fall under the designation of user–generated content. Using readily available software tools, the creator of a video mashup recombines two or more pre–existing videos and/or audio sources into a new, derivative work [2]. That derivative work generates new meanings through the juxtaposition of the original source materials. The notable growth of these mashup practices in the last few years has been enabled through Web 2.0 culture and online architectures of participation, especially the ability to rip and share digital content, access to affordable (even freely available) video editing tools, and easy–to–find and easy–to–follow tutorials. Hence, almost any user, even those with limited or basic media skills, can learn to be a video mashup creator. Furthermore, these users can deploy the Internet as a platform, and upload their new mashup creations into distribution channels such as YouTube or Facebook, share them as links in e–mail messages, or post them as "embeds" on Web sites to enable their spread to other users [3]. Subsequently, inspired after watching another user's mashup, still more users may choose to participate directly in remix culture, and produce their own video mashups. In terms of empowerment, these further acts of participation are crucial because they signify how users can become more active and more media literate with the online and off–line information they are consuming on a daily basis [4]. While many mashup projects are done as personal amusements, to demonstrate cleverness, or for other entertainment purposes, in this essay, we will be examining mashups created and distributed for overtly political reasons, or intentionally produced and shared to comment upon and contest other forms of sanctioned political media [5]. This type of user–generated content might be reasonably called — in its political focus and modes of empowerment — citizen–generated content.

While citizen–generated content is not an entirely new phenomenon, the number of online users mashing up or remixing videos for political purposes notably increased during the 2008 U.S. election cycle. Mainstream media awareness of the practice initially spiked around Phil De Vellis' "Vote Different" video mashup that first appeared online in March 2007 [6]. Subsequently, high–profile mashups during the 2008 elections included hip–hop star will.i.am's "Yes We Can" video (a remix of Obama's New Hampshire primary concession speech in February 2008), the eponymous Obama Girl's "Crush on Obama" video, satirist Paul Shanklin's "Barack the Magic Negro" song (a remix of an *Los Angeles Times* column and the song "Puff the Magic Dragon") and Comedy Central's late night host Stephen Colbert's "John McCain's Green Screen Challenge" (a mashup contest centering around a speech given by Republican presidential candidate John McCain) [7]. Each of these mashups in turn encouraged or stimulated other users to create their own video mashups, such as the numerous user–generated videos on BarelyPolitical.com that remix video footage of Obama Girl, or users who submitted their own mashup creations into Colbert's remix challenge.

While much new scholarship on new media and politics (Sunstein, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; Benkler, 2007; Shirky, 2008) extends our understanding of the role of user–generated content and its political implications, the video mashup has not received a large amount of attention. The bulk of the scholarship so far has been focused on writerly Web–based media formats, especially blogs and wikis. But an examination of video mashups matters because recent trends continue to show that the Internet, and online video, is playing a larger role in U.S. politics. For example, in the 2008 U.S. presidential elections, 55 percent of all adult Americans went online to participate in the political process and/or to gather news or read stories about the election (Smith, 2008). According to Pew Internet Project, 45 percent of Internet users went online to watch a video related to the election, and one–third of Internet users forwarded political content (Smith, 2008). The rise in online media activities is being matched by a concomitant diminution in the role of traditional media sources, especially television and newspapers, as primary sources of political information for the electorate at large (Fox, 2008). Moreover, as younger citizens —many of whom are digital natives [8] — continue to flex their political muscle and increase their participation in elections, do–it–yourself media practices will most likely continue to impact the U.S. political scene [9].

These numbers are confirmed by Morley Winograd and Michael D. Hais, authors of *Millennial Makeover: MySpace, YouTube & the Future of American Politics*, in which the authors argue that the 2008 election would likely usher in a political realignment based on the combined factors of the civic–minded social values and the technological savvy of the Millennial Generation. Winograd and Hais predicted a "technological tsunami" that would sweep away traditional top–down political practices to replace them with a political culture built on peer–to–peer sharing, social networking, and video editing, in which "everyone wants to be a producer" (Winograd and Hais, 2008). One sign of the power of Web–based entities and communities in the U.S. election process were the roles YouTube and Facebook played during the 2008 election, especially in relation to co–hosting Presidential debates with television news outfits CNN and ABC News, respectively (Jenkins, 2009). These developments led *Vanity Fair* cultural critic James Wolcott to declare 2008 "the YouTube election" (Wolcott, 2007).

While these online trends are significant, it is not the goal of this essay to attempt to measure or quantify the impact of video mashups on the U.S. political process, nor are we trying to predict all the ways that video mashups might develop and influence the future of U.S. politics. Rather, we will examine why political video mashups are sparking debates and generating political action about and around user–generated content in the U.S. political process. Are video mashups signaling a new era of online political media practices whereby any user can contest and (potentially) compete with officially sanctioned media offerings for voter interest? Why have certain video mashups already influenced, and in some cases even instigated, political discussions, especially during the 2008 election cycle?

In addressing these questions, we explore how mashups operate as allegories of citizen empowerment. As allegories of empowerment, mashup creators engage in a set of materialist practices that represent a belief in the power of personal broadcasting, media creativity and remix aesthetics to contribute to a stronger and healthier participatory democracy. Furthermore, creators and viewers of political video mashups engage in online discussions around these mashups in video comment sections, blogs and podcasts that further the impact of these mashups as meaningful activities within deliberative democracy (Sunstein, 2006). Finally, we argue that political video mashups are part of the historical lineage of political media activism in the U.S., especially earlier capture–based practices that are being transformed in the era of convergence culture (Edwards, 2002). Whereas traditional video activism and inexpensive portable video cameras advanced the claim that "anybody can be a video activist," contemporary mashup activism and inexpensive non–linear editing tools propose a similar digital rhetoric that nowadays "anybody can be an editor activist" (Faber, 1990).

In the pre–digital age, video activists and alternative video collectives often referred to the video camera as "a tool, a weapon, and a witness" in terms of its role in documenting political struggles and in its stimulation of a (communal) desire for videography as a means towards achieving community–based political objectives (Faber, 1990). That formulation of video activism continues to prove useful as a way of categorizing and analyzing political video mashups. Just as in the case of a video camera in the hands of a video activist at a street rally, engaged online users can produce mashups as a means for political advocacy (tool), political protest (weapon), and political observation (witness). First, in terms of political mashups as a mode of advocacy, we will examine Phil De Vellis' video "Vote Different," (2007) which recombined a 1984 Macintosh computer ad with a Hillary Clinton video. Second, as an example of mashups as a form of protest, we will examine Wax Audio and Cal–TV's "Imagine This" (2004; 2006), which recombined John Lennon's song "Imagine" with a number of different video sources. Finally, for an analysis of a mashup as political observation and commentary, we will examine Andy Cobb's "Godfather IV," (2007) which remixed video of former U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales with scenes from Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather*. Ultimately, close analysis and attention to the mashup's complex textual operations will help us better understand how video mashups contribute to deliberative and participatory democracy, operate

as tools of political expression, and function as allegories of citizen empowerment.

The video mashup as political advocacy: "Vote Different" (2007)

"Vote Different," a video mashup of the highly regarded 1984 Apple Macintosh Super Bowl advertisement directed by Ridley Scott, replaces the IBM–style Big Brother figure in the Apple advertisement with footage of Hillary Clinton's "Conversation with America" speech. The original Apple ad famously depicts a dreary world in which workers wearing identical grey clothing move listlessly through their workday while passively absorbing the messages delivered from a Big Brother figure on a giant screen that looms above them. In the video, Senator Clinton, substituted for the male Big Brother figure, speaks to the utterly passive audience, repeating vague platitudes about political participation, until an athletic woman sprints through the crowd, throwing a hammer through the screen, and by implication shattering the "politics–as–usual" she has come to represent. Edited onto the woman's t–shirt is a modified Apple logo made to resemble an O, identifying her with rival presidential candidate Barack Obama. The original advertisement, an allegory of the Macintosh user fighting against a conformist establishment, maps neatly onto cultural desires for a more participatory political system.

The ad itself displays the basic logic of the mashup. The audio track is synchronized with a pre–existing visual track (the Apple computer ad) and in the juxtaposition forces a new reading of both tracks. Clinton's speech is no longer associated with her attempt to reach out to Democratic voters for her 2008 Presidential election bid, but aligned with Orwellian politics, and she is seen in the guise of Big Brother, recalling conservative attacks on her work as First Lady. The visual track, which originally was meant to highlight the liberatory power of the Macintosh is re–coded in the mashup as potential "voters" listening to the "doublespeak" of Hillary Clinton in slavish fashion. The referent of "1984" goes back to George Orwell's novel, but in so doing, drops the commercial's original reason for even summoning up the date "1984." The commercial was a wonderful conflation of Orwell and the actual year 1984. The ad originally ran during the Super Bowl in 1984, the year in which the Macintosh was introduced. But in ways that the mashup demonstrates, not all meanings associated with source material are equally important. In many ways, secondary and tertiary meanings, meanings that might be critical to the reading of the source material in isolation, become less important in the rambunctious intertextuality of the mashup.

Jonathan Gray's work on "critical intertextuality" in *Watching with the Simpsons* helps to isolate the critical operations that can take place through the juxtaposition of two or more texts. In much the same way that televisual satire permits audiences to make sense of current events, video mashups extend the project of "working through" the news, allowing the raw material of politics to become more comprehensible. (Ellis, 1999; Gray, 2006; Tryon, 2008) One of the strengths of Gray's model of intertextuality is also his acknowledgment that while play between texts may produce polysemous readings, it can also be "controlled, limited, or even programmed." [10] Building from Gerard Genette's concept of the paratext, Gray argues that framing materials can be used not only to promote favored readings but also to challenge dominant readings. Thus, he offers a useful model for thinking about ways in which intertexts can "be used […] to attack a text, to subvert its preferred meanings and to propose unofficial and unsanctioned meanings." [11] Gray identifies parody as an especially powerful form of critical intertextuality, offering the examples of television shows such as *The Simpsons* that parody political and popular culture texts in order to subvert dominant meanings, an activity that quite often centers around the

Simpson family's TV watching habits. Shows such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, The Colbert Report*, and *The Simpsons* all use popular culture imagery to poke holes in the discourse of powerful political figures. It is within this domain of critical intertextuality that most political mashups operate.

Like Gray, we are enthusiastic about the possibilities of critical intertextuality in challenging dominant political discourse and as an act of political advocacy. However, we also identify one crucial distinction between political mashups and televisual models of intertextuality: the mediating function of the Web. In this sense, political mashups depend on what we will be calling a *critical digital intertextuality*, which we will define as form of critical intertextuality that is informed by the discursive properties of digital media, specifically its recombinatorial features and the active participation of users. Because digital media make the production, manipulation, and distribution of moving images easier than ever before, a new regime of user–generated critical political videos becomes a possibility. In fact, as Gray implies, there is already an inherent relationship between critical intertextuality as it is practiced on television and its digital cousin, with both televisual and digital critique following the logic of the "textual poacher," who steps into a text and reuses it as she wishes (Jenkins, 1992). Critical digital intertextuality requires a remix mentality — it is no longer about just decoding or opposing the preexisting content of a visual entertainment, it is about contesting it, using bricolage techniques to challenge its status as a transparent media text. In an updating of the famous Walter Benjamin idea, the editor has now become the producer (Benjamin, 1968). Mashups have become powerful, and have gained traction within Web communities, because they are informed by productive logics as much as consumptive logics.

As a result, the most powerful videos are those that inspire or provoke responses or future productions. "Vote Different" wasn't only viewed millions of times online, this video inspired a multitude of users to mash up their own versions. For example, a Clinton supporter produced an almost identical, though much clumsier ad, substituting Barack Obama for the Big Brother figure, while another anti–Clinton ad, "Vote Smart: A Warning to All Women about Hillary Clinton," incorporated highly dubious "information" about Clinton's gender politics while using significant chunks of the original "Vote Different" ad. There are also a fascinating number of videos on the topic of "Why I made the 'Vote Different' Ad." These videos play with the issue of the pseudo–anonymity of ParkRidge47, questioning De Vellis' claims about why he made the video [12]. These subsequent videos illustrate the role of the citizen–user in reshaping and contesting the meanings of mashup videos and their manifest political content.

"Vote Different" also managed to attract the attention of newspaper and cable news analysts who typically argued that its popularity marked a historic shift where anyone could participate in the election process, even promising "the end of the broadcast era." De Vellis himself promoted this reading on *The Huffington Post*, arguing that this video advocates a particular view of Democratic Party philosophy: "the specific point of the ad was that Obama represents a new kind of politics, and that Senator Clinton's 'conversation' is disingenuous. And the underlying point was that the old political machine no longer holds all the power." De Vellis' quote shows his understanding of how the mashup can be used as a tool for candidate advocacy. While it is too simplistic to suggest that De Vellis' mashup signals "the end of the broadcast era," this work of citizen–generated content did provide then–candidate Obama a needed publicity boost on one of his key themes — Obama as signifying a new brand of politics — that gave him momentum at an early juncture in his contest with Hillary Clinton.

As viewing and remixing start to meld into coterminous practices, critical digital intertextuality will become a more common technique and a way of thinking about political representations. With the rise of online video databases, digital media offer new models of intertextuality, which in turn, enable new forms of video–based political criticism. While we must remain attentive to the existence of a digital divide that prevents true universal access, the rhetorics of citizen empowerment and creativity have opened up a discursive

space for political mashups.

The video mashup as political protest: "Imagine This" (2004/2006)

Wax Audio originally created "Imagine This" as an audio–only mashup. The song originally appeared in 2004 and was spread online by audiences who were opposed to the War in Iraq and frustrated by George W. Bush's media–ready promotion of the War. The "Imagine This" track was part of a seven–song EP produced in 2005 by Tom Compagnoni called "Mediacracy." Compagnoni, an independent recording artist based in Sydney, Australia, uses remix and mashup techniques in his "Mediacracy" project to challenge and recontextualize sound bites by politicians and the corporate news media about the War in Iraq. In "Imagine This," Compagnoni mashes together John Lennon's "Imagine" and "Give Peace a Chance" [13], with a new vocal track featuring the voice of George Bush. Instead of a mash–up between Lennon's music and Bush's war rhetoric, Compagnoni makes it sound as if Bush is actually "singing" Lennon's pacifist anthems. Compagnoni accomplishes this through micro–edits of Bush's speeches. Compagnoni located the necessary words from Bush's public statements to match the verbal components of Lennon's song "Imagine," then edited them together to fit lyrically, and finally employed filtering techniques (especially echo) to give Bush's words a slight melodic lilt. The effect is eerie and disconcerting: while the lyrics match those of the John Lennon songs, the see–sawing cadence of the words and sputtering delivery emote a manufactured and robotic reality.

In April 2006, Dublin–based video artist and DJ, John Callaghan of Cal–TV created a video based on the Wax Audio song. Within days of its appearance, Callaghan's video was posted to dozens of high–profile blogs [14], circulating quickly around the world. As these high–profile blogs picked up "Imagine This," other bloggers joined in by linking and offering brief commentary on the video, allowing them to participate not only in the sharing of the video but also to feel a sense of political protest and semiotic solidarity with others who shared the clip's politics. And, like "Vote Different," "Imagine This" inspired a number of politically oriented responses, including the "Bush Blair Endless Love" video and a version of President Bush appearing to sing U2's anti–war anthem, "Sunday Bloody Sunday." But the politics of protest in a video mashup can be quite complex, and frequently it is the idea of remix as a process — a process that opens up a space for debate and discussion, and originating from DJ culture — that is central in these videos more than a unified ideological statement (Miller, 2004).

The first shot of "Imagine This" shows the Presidential Seal, with the words "A Message from the President." Callaghan's next shot is of President Bush seated as if ready to give an address to the American people with the first bars of the National Anthem playing. However, that quick insert shot is quickly foiled by a shot of TV static that wipes out both the image and the music. The "TV static" shot operates as a type of guerrilla television interruption, whereby the viewer gets the sense that the signal has been hijacked, that Bush has been forced off the air. The fourth shot is of John Lennon talking about his anti–war views. As Lennon speaks, we see a slow motion shot of a 1960s countercultural icon — a hippie chick — that harkens us back to a previous era of anti–war flower–power sentimentality. But there is a clash between the aggressive tone and vulgarity of Lennon's words ("you fuckers" and "fuck you all") and the day–glo, slow–mo optimism of the hippie chick. It is not clear that this video will be able to reconcile Lennon's strident anti–war rhetoric with an image of a countercultural idyll reminiscent of the "Summer of Love." But if the TV static wrested control of the video from Bush, a shot of a military explosion takes control back. In its first 14

seconds, the video spans the "left–right", "hawk–dove" divide to argue that any approach to the debate that is non–conciliatory is probably doomed to failure: just like the war protesters want to co–opt or interrupt the President's message, those in favor of military action in Iraq equally want to interrupt or silence the protesters. There is very little space, the video suggests, for meaningful debate about the War.

After this opening, the video proposes the figure of the DJ as one way to avoid polarizing positions. The metaphor of turntablism is appropriate here. There is no singular narrative being advanced but two competing power systems that are in direct collision: the classic clash between hawks and doves, war and peace. However, the DJ can shift between tracks and improvise new ideas on the fly, and might be a potential mediator between these two colliding ideologies. The importance of the recombinatorial power of the DJ is highlighted since it is the only footage that is repeated in the opening 25 seconds. It signifies the DJ as the actual author in control of this narrative. And in fact, the rest of the video will be dominated by a DJ or VJ logic. At the same time, the identification of the DJ as author places emphasis on the challenges of assembling footage to match the audio track, highlighting the degree to which the mashup is an editor's rather than a director's medium. The DJ as editor is forced to work with already existing material, ceding control to available material while trying to produce a new understanding of these competing ideologies.

Callaghan as an editor demonstrates the interrelated dimensions of syntagmatic and paradigmatic construction quite explicitly in the video mashup (Manovich, 2002). Existing video footage is selected from a paradigmatic dimension, *i.e.*, Callaghan needs to locate actual footage that can be matched with the Wax Audio soundtrack. However, each piece of video footage must also operate syntagmatically — *i.e.*, the footage will eventually be read in a linear fashion as the footage is literally "strung together." But constructing new meanings out of a database of video images is not the same as creating new sentences in spoken language; the paradigmatic dimension is a constrained set of images that lacks the full utility of the linguistic sets of "verbs" and "synonyms." For example, a mashup editor might want to include an image of George Bush in a mashup, but the images of George Bush will all be constrained — in the paradigmatic dimension-by specific contexts: a State of the Union Address, a press conference, a photo op. Therefore, while the shot might call for George Bush in the syntagmatic dimension, choices have to be made both paradigmatically and syntagmatically in selecting the most appropriate video clip or image at that point in the video. Most often, the syntagmatic dimension has priority in governing the choice of clips, as it is the dimension that controls the overall time sequence of the video; where the video starts and where the video ends are decision made in the syntagmatic dimension. And if your paradigmatic choices are limited (*i.e.*, there are not a lot of images that will work both paradigmatically and syntagmatically at the same time), that can lead to some paradigmatic choices being unusual or even at odds with the overall meaning of the video as images must be placed in every frame in the syntagmatic dimension.

In terms of highlighting the conflicts between paradigmatic vs. syntagmatic construction, "Imagine This" contains a notable example: an extended (and potentially problematic) shot of a Muppet — the character named Animal — playing drums. On one level, this can be seen as a paradigmatic choice to keep the meanings of the syntagmatic axis flowing, since Callaghan needs an image of a drummer to coincide with the drumming that is clearly heard on the audio track. But beyond the paradigm/syntagm distinction, there seems to be another meaning that emerges at this moment that deserves additional commentary. While it might be tempting to conclude that a Muppet playing drums is done — without any great attention to unruly meanings — to create a matching shot to the drumming on the audio soundtrack, it adds an element of surreality to the opening of this video. At precisely the moment the video announces the power of the DJ, the inability to conceive of a connection between two diametrically opposed thinkers (Bush and Lennon) give way to a fantastical and imaginary interlude, an absurdist romp: a Muppet appears to take center stage. We have to conclude intentionality on the part of Callaghan, who

had many choices for drumming footage. The deliberate inclusion of Animal seems to suggest a need to depart from our expectations, as if we need to really "imagine" something wholly different, with Callaghan using an unexpected lexia to remind the viewer to keep her sense of humor at the ready [15]/

While "Imagine This" is masterfully edited, it cannot avoid certain conflicts inherent in matching visual data to the original sonic blueprint. These conflicts suggest how mashups operate as a form of political resistance. It is important to remember that since mashups rely on found footage, that original footage will always act as a constraint in the final product, no matter how cleverly the juxtapositions are conceived. In actually seeing Bush sing the song, we are aware (doubly aware) of the song's constructed nature. We no longer need a good "ear" to hear the edits; we see them as jump cuts that break the diegetic illusion of a "singing" President. At the same time, the song's utopian words are challenged by the dearth of images we have to deploy for "utopian thinking." As we are asked to "imagine" this other world, we have trouble picturing it. In fact, Callaghan does not show us images of a post–war utopia, but instead shows us our current reality, especially during a final montage that crosscuts between tanks racing across the Iraq desert and the smiling children who have been endangered by the War. Here, we see only the anti–war side in the images of war protests, dead bodies, and Administration photo ops. And while this is perhaps inevitable in a video that is clearly more aligned with liberal, anti–war sentiments, it does negate — to a degree — the integrative logic of the DJ. The opening promise of this video is that we might find a way of framing the war that moves beyond the polarizing politics of the moment, but in fact, we find those positions, while in play at certain points in this video, to be somewhat stuck in their original positions at the conclusion. In fact, the inability of the DJ to reconcile the two competing discourses may leave viewers with a sense of resignation regarding political action. Unlike a video that analyzes the reasons and causes for U.S. involvement, this video never moves beyond satire into the realm of political activism. While "Imagine This" functions well as a critique of the political rhetoric of the Bush administration, its utopian vision is limited.

The video mashup as political commentary: "Godfather IV" (2007)

In May 2007, a newly Democratic U.S. Congress began investigating whether the U.S. Department of Justice, under the direction of Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, had fired eight U.S. attorneys for political, not professional, reasons. As the testimony unfolded over the summer of 2007, Congress also learned that Gonzales, then serving as White House counsel, and Andrew Card, President Bush's chief of staff, paid an emergency visit to a hospital where then–Attorney General John Ashcroft was in intensive care. According to the testimony of James B. Comey, Ashcroft's deputy, the purpose of Card and Gonzales' visit was to pressure Ashcroft into signing off on a reauthorization of Bush's domestic surveillance program, which had recently been ruled illegal. Comey's dramatic account of the scene at the hospital prompted MSNBC pundit Chris Matthews to remark that the testimony "seemed like it was out of 'The Godfather,' where they went to the bedside of the attorney general, who was so ill that he couldn't even perform his duties, and tried to get him to sign a document." (Matthews, 2007) While the details of the Department of Justice scandal may have been relatively obscure for most American citizens, the dramatic imagery of Gonzales and Card hovering over Ashcroft's hospital bed did create a buzz in the grassroots political communities. This unique blend of politics and popular culture was the subject of Andy Cobb's "Godfather 4," a movie trailer mashup video that combined scenes from *The Godfather* with footage of Comey's testimony before

Congress. The resultant project is an excellent example of how the video mashup can be used as an act of political commentary.

Significantly, "Godfather 4" reworks a popular YouTube mashup genre, the fake movie trailer. There are a number of different genres of fake trailers that have begun to emerge on the Web. Typically, a fake trailer will take an existing film and re–edit scenes from it in order to create the illusion that the film belongs to a different genre. Thus, Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* becomes a family comedy, while *The Ten Commandments* is translated into a high school rivalry set in ancient Egypt, "Ten Things I Hate about Commandments," and "Must Love Jaws" becomes a romantic comedy involving a shark. Trailers, of course, are one of the first places where audiences encounter a film text, where viewers are given important cues about the advertised film's genre, tone, and anticipated audience (Kernan, 2004). And fake trailers typically engage with and parody those attempts at making meaning, often deliberately mocking the conventions of using voice–over, titles, and non–diegetic musical cues.

The power of these movie trailer mashups can be traced back to the montage theories formulated by Sergei Eisenstein in the silent era of motion pictures. The editor encourages the viewer to come up with new ideas in the collision of two incompatible images or texts. On one level, mashups are montages that create new meanings through the collision of two or more dialectically rich images. Mashups produce meaning via the collision of two or more texts, typically one text that is associated with the political realm (political speeches, Congressional testimony) and another taken from popular culture (pop songs, movies, TV shows). This collision is not unlike Eisenstein's theory of collision montage where we can "find in the juxtaposition of shots an arrangement of a new qualitative element, a new image, a new understanding." It is this excess of meaning, this "new understanding" that evolves from the practice of montage editing that is crucial to viewers of mashups. In mashups, this collision typically requires the users to be familiar, at some level, with both texts included in the juxtaposition in order for the critique to make sense. They also place emphasis on the role of the user to construct the meaning of the mashup for themselves, requiring them to make the connections, or add new video footage to create even more intertextual collisions and new meanings.

"Godfather IV" uses the montage aesthetic to make a more acute political point. While most trailer mashups are content to parody theatrical trailers and/or invert generic expectations (turning the horror film *The Shining* into a romantic comedy movie trailer, for instance), "Godfather IV" uses our preexisting understanding of the fake trailer genre to succinctly criticize the politicization of the Department of Justice under President Bush. In fact, the video's humor relies on a deeper sense of intertextuality, requiring both a relatively detailed understanding of the DOJ scandal and on our knowledge of the *Godfather* films. Cobb's video playfully refers to cinematic snobbery towards sequels. By titling the imagined movie, "Godfather IV: Fredo's Revenge," Cobb not only gestures towards Bush's nickname for his longtime *consigliore*, but he also identifies the Bush scandal with *Godfather 3*, which is generally regarded by film fans as inferior to the previous two films.

Cobb's video opens with the familiar haunting *Godfather* score, accompanied by a voice–over, performed in this case by Cobb himself, establishing the details of the imagined film. Unlike the video mashup, "Imagine This," Cobb was not constrained by the need to match visual images with the audio text and was therefore free to use whatever video content from the film and from the Congressional testimony he chose. Like most trailers, "Godfather IV" consists of relatively brief shots; however, unlike the flash cuts and hyperkinetic editing often associated movie trailers and video mashups, the opening sequence of "Godfather IV" is edited together through a series of fades, an editing technique more common to art house or Oscar–nominated films. The opening shot of the video depicts the killing of Don Barzini on the steps of a New York City courthouse by Corleone family enforcer Al Neri. The video fades first to a medium close–up shot of Michael Corleone acting as godfather at the christening of his nephew and then to a close–

up of Alberto Gonzales at the hearings before fading to a title card that reads "The Godfather Part IV: Fredo's Revenge." Thus, while the first two shots depict Michael Corleone's consolidation of power, his ruthless disregard of the law, the third shot of Gonzales, the man President Bush famously nicknamed Fredo, undercuts the seriousness of the first two shots while identifying Gonzales with Michael's criminal behavior. The voice–over narration puts additional "spin" on these images, describing "a world where law is meaningless, power is unchecked, and loyalty is everything." The title card also reminds us that we are watching a trailer for an (imagined) sequel, one that suggests the Bush administration has become a parody of itself.

From here, the video develops its comparison of the hospital scene in the *Godfather* with Comey's testimony, placing Comey as the "star" of "Godfather IV," the key witness who will bring down the corrupt political figures. Immediately after the title card, we see Comey testifying before Congress, describing in dramatic detail the confrontation between Gonzales and Comey at the hospital in John Ashcroft's hospital room, illustrating that testimony with images from *The Godfather*. The video culminates with Comey reporting that Andrew Card told him that he had come to the hospital merely to wish Ashcroft well, a claim that is questioned by a cut to one of the most famous scenes in *The Godfather*, in which Hollywood producer Jack Woltz wakes up screaming after discovering a horse's head in his bed. The sudden, piercing scream comically casts doubt on Card's assertion while also paying homage to one of *The Godfather's* most popular scenes. However, the trailer — and the humor —doesn't end here. As an exterior shot of Woltz's mansion fades out, the announcer adds, "Godfather Part IV. And you thought the third one sucked." Once again, the Bush administration is associated not only with the Coppola's gangster saga but also with the film buff's distaste for film sequels. And even then, Cobb cannot resist getting in one more joke, adding another line in voice–over, "Coming soon, Godfather V: The Paul Wolfowitz Story," a reference to Paul Wolfowitz's decision to resign as president of the World Bank after it was revealed that he used his position to secure a promotion for his longtime girlfriend, Shaha Ali Riza.

Thus, unlike the other videos, "Godfather IV" avoids constructing an explicitly utopian narrative (as we have seen in the advocacy or protest mashups), and instead offers mostly a commentary or parody of the Bush administration through the genre of the fake trailer. This approach requires an informed audience aware not only of the generalities of the Bush administration scandals but also of the *Godfather* films and the genre of fake trailers, and the video very clearly recognizes itself as being part of this tradition of satire. Despite these potential limitations, "Godfather IV" performs vital critical work. Not merely content to poke holes in the system, the video moves toward criticizing the system itself, the lack of checks and balances that allowed the confrontation over the Patriot Act to take place. Instead of merely taking on individual public figures, the video is a commentary, as it seems to imply a broader sense of political corruption, one suggested by the (insincerely) promised sequel due to follow "Godfather IV." Finally, while "Godfather IV" offers substantive critiques of the Bush administration, it does not appear to seek to mobilize individuals or groups into any specific political action, as was seen in the cases of advocacy and protest.

Conclusion

These three mashup examples by De Vellis, Callaghan, and Cobb demonstrate that there is a wide range of techniques and styles behind political video mashups. And in this essay, we propose two basic methods through which we can understand how mashups create meaning: the paradigmatic/syntagmatic construction of editors and the critical digital intertextuality of viewers. But as practices, political video mashups are driven by the viral logics of recombination and reproduction. And while it is doubtful that De Vellis, Callaghan and Cobb would even call

themselves "activists," something is happening around user–generated content and critical digital intertextuality in relation to citizen empowerment [16]. Mashup work will continue to grow in the larger context of citizen-generated media.

First, these three mashups are allegories of citizen empowerment. They are exemplars of citizen–generated political media. Political video mashups can reach a wide audience without access to traditional journalistic outlets and can operate beyond the control of corporate media and traditional party politics. We analyzed three texts in depth, but each of these videos has found interest among a wide base of users and spawned either a massive archive of remixes and imitations, or connected deeply to a remix sensibility, as in the case of Cobb's engagement with fake movie trailers. When connected not only to a logic of participatory culture, but to an overt political sensibility, such acts of remix culture and citizen engagement cannot simply be ignored. These mashups are working demonstrations of what can happen when citizens make and remix their own media. They send a message that citizens can (and will) create new forms of media that address social, political and ethical issues.

Second, political video mashups critically use existing media texts to advance new political narratives and promote political subtexts. This is an emerging form of media literacy. Rather than emphasizing ways of reading *against* the media and analyzing the influences of media organizations, this form of media literacy is a reading *through* the media. Video mashup creators rely on the media savvy of a digitally and culturally literate audience. They use critical digital intertextuality to attract an audience because the mashing up of media texts is simultaneously an act of critical reading. When done well, as in the three examples highlighted here, these texts can become cultural touchstones that enter into the realm of political discourse and debate. And beyond promoting further video productions, the critical impulses released by the mashup lead towards greater audience involvement in decoding and debating the meanings of these texts. Like fans of *The Simpsons*, mashup fans chat, blog and comment online to understand and share the meanings of video mashups and their frequently rich and abundant subtexts. In this case, blogs, Web sites, message boards and YouTube comments all work as paratexts to explain and explore the meanings of texts and subtexts of the video mashup, while also serving as sites for further production and dissemination of political videos. And while some of the online commentary can be inane and inconsequential, the overall force of networked publics — that are discussing and sharing these mashups in online environments — contributes to the popularity of this form of new media authorship.

Third, political video mashups are a departure from early modes of media activism, and that difference accounts for some measure of its popularity and audience reach. Remixing De Vellis' "Vote Different" or Cobb's "Godfather IV" video mashup is a political act, but one that is not simply an offshoot of movement politics or a specific political agenda. The participatory logics of political video mashups are different from earlier eras of media activism — especially video activism — where the activism and the media production were thoroughly intertwined. Political video mashups operate at a remove from earlier alternative forms of media production. In their embrace, they form more of a political center (though leaning towards left–of–center), than their alternative media forebears. Also, especially in the three examples we highlighted, there does not seem to be a single issue or a singular agenda that drives political media mashups. Like much political media that operates largely in terms of parody, satire and humor, the messages sent by the mashup creators are often a rejection of the politics of the status quo, a desire for change that doesn't identify the solutions *per se* but emphasizes the problems needing remedy.

Perhaps the most commonly discussed question is whether political mashups and other user–generated videos had any measurable effect on the 2008 election or on politics more broadly. As Wolcott's article suggests, political pundits discussed these videos in terms of citizen empowerment, as people who feel alienated from the political process increasingly use Internet tools in order to feel as if they are participants in

the process. Because the mashup techniques can be appropriated by the campaigns themselves, the techniques themselves can be and have been embraced by the political campaigns, whether through the production of similar videos or through the tacit endorsement of videos favorable to their campaign message [17]. Moreover, the very fact that mashup videos can circulate across media also ensures that they can be reframed by the very political discourses that they set out to criticize. Rather than being seduced by the hype, we seek to understand how citizen–generated content might be changing our media landscape and our politics. **FM**

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Notes

1. Quote by Robin Bell can be found at http://www.otal.umd.edu/~mgk/blog/archives/000680.html, accessed 1 May 2009.

2. Free video editing tools that allow users to create remixes, such as YouTube's remixer program, can be found for free on the Web, but most high end video mashup work uses more expensive software tools like Apple's Final Cut Pro, and Adobe's Premiere Pro and AfterEffects.

3. "Embeds" refers to the ability for a user to place a link to a video on their Web site without the actual need to host the video.

4. This is part of a larger trend towards a new type of participatory media literacy. See, for example, MIT's New Media Literacies Project at http://newmedialiteracies.org/ accessed 1 May 2009.

5. For definitional purposes in this paper, "sanctioned" will mean affiliated directly with a political campaign or pre–existing political organization. We argue that one key distinction is that we are not focusing on video mashups that have been paid for by a candidate's campaign fund.

6. Phil De Vellis' video, "Vote Different," was a media sensation. One particularly perceptive account of the media blitz around "Vote Different," was James Wolcott account in *Vanity Fair* in June 2007. See James Wolcott, "The YouTube election," *Vanity Fair* (June 2007), at http://www.vanityfair.com/ontheweb/features/2007/06/wolcott200706, accessed 1 May 2009.

7. For a discussion of viral videos and depictions of campaign rhetoric, see, Chuck Tryon, "Representing the Presidency: Viral videos, intertextuality, and political participation," In: Michael Kackman, Marnie Binfield, Matthew Thomas Payne, Allison Perlman, and Bryan Sebok (editors). *Flow TV: Essays on a convergent medium*. New York: Routledge, 2009.

8. According to *Wikipedia*, a digital native "is a person who is 'Born Digital', that is one who has grown up with digital technology such as computers, the Internet, mobile phones

and MP3s." Source: Wikipedia.org, accessed 1 May 2009.

[9.](9.) CIRCLE (Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) has developed research on the civic and political engagement of Americans between the age of 15 and 25. Their research showed that youth participation rose in the 2008 Presidential election, including two million more youth votes than in the 2004 election cycle. See http://www.civicyouth.org/, accessed 1 May 2009.

[10.](10.) Gray, 2006, p. 36.

[11.](11.) Gray, 2006, p. 37.

[12.](12.) Much of the controversy surrounding the video can be attributed to the fact that it was originally posted anonymously on YouTube several weeks ago under the pseudonym, ParkRidge47 (Hilary Clinton was born in Park Ridge, Illinois, in 1947). Because the video was posted anonymously and because it explicitly identified Clinton with Big Brother, a number of readings emerged on the Web attributing the video not only to Obama supporters but also to Republican activists.

[13.](13.) This audio mashup emphasizes John Lennon's solo work but does include snippets of Beatles' songs including "Strawberry Fields Forever," and the famous final chord from "A Day in the Life." But the dominant musical references are "Imagine" and "Give Peace a Chance."

[14.](14.) According to the blog tracking service, Technorati, several high–profile, liberal–left blogs, including Pandagon, American Street, MyDD, Pharyngula, and Brian Flemming, all linked to the video on 16 April 2006, about a week after the video first appeared. Soon afterwards, dozens of other lesser–known bloggers picked up the video, with most links to the video occurring during a one–week span.

[15.](15.) The use of Animal may also be read in terms of the export of U.S. culture globally. In "Perfect Transmission: Evil Bert Laden," Mark Poster describes the circulation of photomontages linking the Sesame Street character Bert and Osama bin Laden by explaining that Muppets have come to represent U.S. cultural imperialism. In *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins reads the "Bert is Evil" phenomenon more narrowly as symptomatic of the convergence culture in which images now circulate.

[16.](16.) In e–mail correspondence with the authors, Callaghan explicitly denies the label of "activist."

[17.](17.) The influence of political mashups is perhaps best illustrated in a short online video in which Hillary Clinton introduces her campaign's theme song. Clinton introduced the song in a short video that parodied the notorious final scene of *The Sopranos*.

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